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Testimony prepared for Judiciary Committee Meeting September 5, 2007 regarding HB5054-5057

I am Donna Cornwell, Executive Director of Center for Women in Transition located in Holland. I have been in that position for 11 years. I am here to testify in favor of House Bills 5054-5057.

Our agency has been providing a range of services to victims of domestic violence for 30 years. In approximately 1997 we began to consider the possibility of opening a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner Program under our agency umbrella. At that time our agency provided counseling for victims of sexual assault, and we were concerned that all of those who sought our assistance were persons who had been assaulted years, and even decades previously. These victims were still struggling to put the experience of sexual assault behind them. We wondered if these survivors would still be struggling for so many years if they had received compassionate care immediately after the assault. We knew that more recent victims of sexual assault were also not receiving immediate care and we wondered whether they would be left to struggle for years and decades to put the experience behind them as well. We felt that there had to be a better way to serve survivors immediately, in order for them to have a better long term outcome.

We formed a committee of Center staff, hospital personnel, nurses, law enforcement and survivors to investigate our options. We conducted studies of women in the community and found that the rate of sexual assault and the rate of reporting that sexual assault in our community mirrored national statistics. Most such crimes had gone unreported to any official and most victims did not seek or receive any help in addressing the ramifications of the assault. When asked, most survivors reported the wish that a program focusing on the needs of victims of sexual assault had been available to them.

Based on the results of our study, and additional research into SANE programs which had begun forming throughout the country, our study group recommended the initiation of a SANE program to serve our two-county area. We included the design of such a program in the building we were remodeling for our program service center. With a three year commitment from one foundation we opened our program in 2001. Since that time we have struggled to find solid financial footing for the program.

Our program is small; serving 60 to 75 survivors a year, but the difference the program makes to each individual is significant. Among those served was a young man with special needs who was assaulted by another male who

offered him a ride. It took tremendous courage for this young man to come forward to report this crime and to participate in an exam. The young man's father was extremely grateful for our staff's ability to meet the special needs of his son, preventing, he hoped, a tremendously damaging negative emotional reaction by his son. A young woman who was given a date-rape drug and gang raped and left unconscious was supported when evidence gathered by our SANE program led to the conviction of her five rapists. Several young women made more vulnerable by their mental handicaps were assisted in understanding the exam process and were assisted in coming to an understanding about the assault. And we have served an 80 year old woman who was attacked in her home. This brave elderly woman made a great public testimony regarding the value of our program in helping her to survive the trauma of the attack. These survivors, like all survivors served by our program, were served compassionately in the privacy of the SANE suite of offices where the program's full resources focused only on them during the two or three hour exam process. We could provide what no emergency room could: privacy and the undivided attention of several staff specially trained in the SANE forensic evidence gathering process.

We have struggled financially for the program's entire six year history. We do not have a solid funding stream for the program and each year must try to raise the funds needed to continue to deliver these essential services. We continue because we must assure that these services are available in our community. It would be a tremendous boost to our community if funding could be assured through the vehicles proposed in House Bills 5054-5057 so that we might focus our energy where it belongs, on the victim of sexual assault. We appreciate that the funding for these bills would come from the perpetrators of crimes, would be additional revenues and would not diminish funding currently going to other projects supported by the Justice System Fund.

Thank you for allowing me to share my comments.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Donna Cornwell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Donna" and last name "Cornwell" clearly distinguishable.

Donna Cornwell
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